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ABSTRACT

This discussion of student output concentrates on reasons for learner's errors, types of errors, and some techniques for correcting them. An error is defined as an unintentional deviation from an expected pattern, which could be a linguistic form, a phonological or a grammatical rule, or an incorrect form or expression in a particular situation. Most errors students make are variable, developmental, and a necessary part of the language-learning process. Generally, such errors can be dealt with in two ways: (1) by building in reviews in the syllabus, and (2) by keeping track of student errors and affording students the opportunity to correct their own errors. It is suggested that whatever method of correction is used, students should understand what the teacher is doing, and why. The method used with children might resemble the way children learn their own language. Methods used with adults would be variable, depending on the situation and the focus of the lesson. (AMH)

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THE TEACHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE STUDENT'S OUTPUT IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSOOM

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Most of what I am going to say you already know. Like many of our ESL students, however, we need "reminders" every so often. Have you noticed that when you want to bring up a certain grammatical point in the classroom your students often say, "We know that." In a sense, they are correct. On a certain level they "know that," but on other levels, they don't. They make mistakes when trying to use it or use it in the wrong situation. The same is true of us. In teaching we develop certain traits or habits that we "know" are not necessarily good ones, but when caught up in the urgency of the classroom situation, we tend to forget what we "know." Hence the reminder!

The premise on which this discussion is based is that "to err is human, and to forget and understand is only common sense." First, I will try to show you that human language errors are natural and normal; then I will give you some examples of classroom techniques to deal with student errors. I have to start by defining what an error is. An error is an unintentional deviation from an expected pattern. There are two notions that are crucial in this definition. The first is that errors are unintentional; students don't make errors because they want to in order to upset us and make us angry. They make errors because they can't help themselves, and often because they have to. How often have you reacted to a student's error with annoyance, thinking "I taught them that, and they still make errors!" In relation to this notion that errors are unintentional, I am obviously not dealing with "errors that are intentional." These are not true errors. Often language "errors" are made for humorous reasons, "Have a baby, my wife just had a cigar," or for stylistic reasons, like the "errors" found in writers like Gertrude Stein, or Dylan Thomas, or E. E. Cummings. Also, I am not dealing with errors which are unintentional but which have pathological origins. For example, the errors of an aphasic or someone with a speech impediment.

The second part of the definition that is important is the fact that errors are deviations from an expected pattern. This expected pattern could be a linguistic form, a phonological or a grammatical rule ("I will went" for "I will go," or "photography" rather than "photography"). Or it could be the use of a certain form in the wrong situation. Spanish speakers, for example, will often say "good night" when they should say "good evening." They have the right form (the right words and the right pronunciation) but in English we say "good evening" as a greeting and "good night" as a leave-taking form-

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ula, whereas in Spanish, one says "buenas noches" in both situations. The "expected patterns" can also be much less tangible than these examples, something that we can't quite put our finger on. Our second language students often produce forms that are "odd," that are intuitively not English--although we can't always say what it is that is "wrong"--forms that do not conform to the expected patterns of English. These are also "errors."

Let us now take a look at some examples of language errors that native speakers make. I will be dealing with only three categories although there are many, many more.

The first group of examples comes from the literature available in the area of child language acquisition. These errors are considered developmental errors; *i.e.* errors typical of the learning process and which will disappear when the process is completed:

1. All gone outside.
2. What that feeled like?
3. Do you hear the cake mama's making?

Sentence (1) appears to mean "everyone has gone outside" but that is not what it means. That sentence was uttered when the door was closed and the child was unable to see outside. It means something like "I can't see outside any more." Without considering the ungrammaticality or the un-English quality of the sentence, it can be considered a very "creative" sentence--creative in a poetic sense, and in a psycholinguistic sense since, obviously, the child is not imitating a sentence that he has heard but is actually "creating" language on his own. When seen in this light, "all gone outside" is a rather remarkable sentence.

Sentence (2) is readily interpretable despite its obvious phonological and syntactic errors. It means "What did that feel like?" The answer of the person talking to the child was "It feels like rubber, I guess." This response shows two things: first, the sentence should have been in the present tense (which had not been obvious), and second, the interviewer accepted it as a meaningful sentence and made an appropriate reply.

Sentence (3) was used by a child when he walked into his home and was "overwhelmed" by the smell of a cake that was baking in the kitchen. The use of "hear" is clearly incorrect unless, again, we consider the utterance to be very "poetic" or, at the very least, "cute," which would probably be the case.

The question is: Do we ever allow our ESL students to be "creative?" Do we ever allow them the indulgence of poetic license? Do we ever accept meaningfulness over grammaticality? Are we always too eager to say, "wrong!"?

The second type of errors that I would like to illustrate are those that we call "errors of performance"--errors due to carelessness or inattention, rather than to flaws in the speakers' linguistic system. Professor S. Pit Corder considers these "lapses" because native speakers can, and usually do, correct themselves.

4. It doesn't bother me in the s...least,... slightest.
5. It's a bit, um, it hasn't, um. I mean, um...I just wouldn't care to have one like that.

6. That's a question which, if you were to pressure me, I wouldn't know how to answer it.

Sentence (4) shows that a momentary indecision between "least" and "slightest" produced an ungrammatical blend, which was immediately corrected. This ability to self-correct or "repair" is the result of the native speaker's excellent knowledge of the language, which enables him to monitor his performance and make the necessary corrections.

Sentence (5) is an example of a "careful" comment, as if the speaker were looking for the right way of stating a polite rejection or refusal. This carefulness is yet another example of the conscious monitoring and awareness that native speakers are capable of.

In sentence (6), the presence of the shadow pronoun "it," made unnecessary by the presence of the relative pronoun "which," which refers to "question," results in a sentence that is clearly ungrammatical. This error is not at all unusual in the spoken language among native speakers of English.

What about non-native speakers? Do they ever make errors of performance? Do they ever correct themselves? Do we ever give them a chance to correct themselves, to monitor, to edit their output? If a student had used sentence (5) during a Placement Interview, we might have marked him as "non-fluent" without giving it a second thought. In a written composition, a student of mine wrote: "Truth is the kind of reality that you can't disagree with it." Apart from the truth value of the sentence, with which we might or might not agree, the syntactic error of the shadow pronoun is identical to that made by the native speaker in sentence (6). In fact, when it was pointed out to the student that there was an error in the sentence, he was able to correct it. The opportunity to edit written work is more of a learning experience for the student than is a mere "red mark."

The third type of error that I would like to bring to your attention is the result of attempts by native speakers to use a style or register that they are not familiar with. These errors are very frequent in the formal writing of people who are not used to writing formal letters or reports, people who have not mastered "formalese."

The following three examples allegedly come from insurance reports written by accident victims in support of their claims:*

7. I had been driving my car for forty years when I fell asleep at the wheel and had my accident.
8. I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way
9. The other car collided with mine without giving warning of its intentions.

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* I have not seen the original letters from which these sentences were taken. The same is true for sentences 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12.

The three examples that follow are reported to come from letters to the Pension Office (?) with requests for assistance or simply providing required information:

10. Sir, I am forwarding my marriage certificate and two children. One of which is a mistake as you will see.
11. In answer to your letter, I have given birth to a ten-pound baby, is this satisfactory?
12. You have changed my little boy into a girl, will this make any difference?

Although these examples are, on the surface, humorous, we cannot doubt the seriousness of the writers' intentions. Certain phrases and vocabulary items (collided, stationary, forwarding, in answer to your letter, etc.) suggest an awareness of a formal style. The writers' inability to "pull it off," however, results in humorous, though unintentional, ambiguities and inaccuracies.

Should we be surprised, then, when our second language students show a very narrow stylistic range? They seem to be unable to hit the appropriate target--their language is often too formal in informal situations, or too informal, even familiar, in situations that would require a certain degree of formality or social distance. Consider, for a moment, the kind of language that is taught in most of our ESL classes. To a very large extent, it is stylistically "hybrid." It is neither formal, nor informal; it is, particularly in the early stages, not even realistic but rather what can be called "classroom English." Unless we expose our students to realistic varieties of language, unless we make them aware of sociolinguistic variables, it is unlikely that they will be able to produce an adequate formal report, or a good letter to the registrar requesting certain information, or even feel comfortable using the telephone to order a pizza or to call for a taxi.

Native speakers make many other kinds of errors: errors of ambiguity, style, punctuation, spelling, or choice of words. Even newspapers, magazines, and public signs are full of these errors. This is also true of Great Britain, by the way, in case you thought that we speak a poor variety of the Queen's English in North America. In a London hospital there is a sign that reads "Policy for visitors, two to a bed, and a half hour only."

I could go on for hours giving you examples of language errors that people make; I have been collecting language errors for years. The point of all this, however, is to put second language errors in perspective. I have tried to show you that the errors that our students make are unintentional, that they are, in fact, developmental--part of the learning process. I have shown you that they could possibly be lapses or slips of the tongue--errors of performance which the students themselves might be able to correct. Errors could also be the result of unfamiliarity with a certain register or style, and could possibly be the result of our own teaching.

Let us now concentrate a bit more narrowly on the type of errors that our non-native students make. What are the reasons for those errors, and how do we deal with them? First, I'd like to say a few words about the nature of the learners' language. What kind of system, what kind of grammar are they using? It is clear that it is a grammar different from that of their native language. If they were using the grammar of their native

language they would be producing native language sentences! It is also clear that they are not using the target grammar--English. If they were, they would be producing nativelike English sentences. What this means is that they are using neither their native language grammar, nor the target grammar--English. They are using a system of their own. These second language learners' systems have been called "interlanguages." An important characteristic of interlanguages is their instability, the fact that they change or fluctuate over time. That's why our students are "elementary" when they come into our courses, and "advanced" when they leave. The less advanced a student is, the closer his interlanguage will be to his native language. In his attempts at the target language, the student will use what he knows, and what he knows best when he is first starting is his native language. It should not be surprising then, in fact it is only natural, that there should be a lot of "transfer" from the native language in the early stages. As a student progresses, as his knowledge of the target language develops, he is going to rely less on his native language and more on the taught system itself--hence transfer errors will decrease.

Another important characteristic of second language learning that is important for teachers to remember is that a rule will not be learned and incorporated into the learner's language once and for all. Like a child learning his native language, he may have both forms--the old incorrect approximation and the new correct form--for some time. Let me give you an example. Suppose that you have taught the "s" of the third person singular in the simple present tense: he goes; she talks; etc. You present it, you practice, you do patterns drills, you do situational and meaningful exercises, and then you give them a simple homework assignment as review. You ask them to write a simple, short paragraph on the topic "Mary's activities in the morning." So the student goes home and shows up the next day with the following little composition:

> "Mary gets up at seven o'clock every day. She takes a shower and haves breakfast. Then she go to work. She works in a bank...."

The first thing we notice is that the student has produced some correct forms (gets, takes, works) and some incorrect ones (haves, go). Our first reaction might be annoyance: "How can he do this? We just went over this; he wasn't paying attention!" I don't think this is the right way of approaching this. In the first place, the student has produced several instances with the correct form, which shows that learning has taken place. Secondly, one of the errors (haves) is a "good" error; he has applied the correct rule to a case that is exceptional (have ⟶ has). Overgeneralization of a rule is a sign of learning; the student, in fact, is being "creative; he couldn't have seen or heard this form. The error of omission of the form (go) can be attributed to the fact that the rule has not yet been totally incorporated; this is to be expected since rules take some time to be applied categorically; that is, in all situations where they are obligatory. In short, this student has done very well, and you should be pleased rather than angry.

In more general terms, there are two ways of dealing with instability of form: 1) By building-in reviews in the syllabus; 2) by keeping track of student errors.

1. A syllabus that contains built-in reviews is constructed in such a way that it provides opportunities to return systematically to material

covered in earlier stages. These "spiral" syllabuses enable teachers to reinforce material that may have been presented but not thoroughly assimilated.

2. Keeping careful track of the errors that our students make is essential. It is the only way to ensure that a student is progressing rather than backsliding. The errors that we should be concerned with are those that are systematic; *i.e.*, those that appear regularly in a student's output. We often do this in an informal, careless fashion, and we are usually aware of our students' problems. A more systematic approach (using filing cards or folders for each student) will ensure that we follow the student's progress accurately, that we see whether his errors are increasing (he is backsliding), decreasing (he is learning), or whether they are stationary (he is fossilizing--the erroneous forms have become obligatory).

A spiral syllabus will provide some safeguards, but only systematic attention to students' systematic errors can serve as the basis for the individualized instruction (by the teacher or through self-study) which each student needs.

I have mentioned the term systematic errors several times, as opposed to the notion of random errors. In relation to error correction (by the teacher and the student) the distinction is significant. Since it is impossible, and certainly not very pedogogical, to attempt to correct all of the errors our students make, a choice can be made on the basis of error frequency and regularity. Both criteria point in the direction of systematicity (the error is part of the system) rather than randomness (the error is the result of a lapse, or the absence of a rule, or an overgeneralization). From a purely pedagogical point of view, it is not very sound to overwhelm the student with corrections--it is not, after all, what the teacher corrects that matters; what is important is what the student himself incorporates or learns from the correction. Our job is not to return a composition with red marks all over it, indicating what is wrong with it; our task is to see that whatever is wrong is understood and learned by the student. By making this distinction between systematic and random errors, it will be possible for us to discuss errors with our students in a more meaningful way.

Another technique is to give students a chance to find their own errors and to correct them. In written assignments, for example, simply underline or point out that there is an error, and ask your student to find it and correct it. You may be surprised at how many errors your students will be able to find and correct. This technique teaches your students editing (monitoring) strategies which are essential in writing; it will also ensure that performance and other random errors are "flushed out," and that systematic errors are dealt with carefully. After the student has gone over the errors with you, you might ask him to rewrite his composition, treating his first attempt as an edited draft. I am sure that students learn more from re-written, self-edited drafts than by taking a cursory look at a composition which you have "corrected" extensively. In order to deal with written assignments in this fashion, it will be necessary to devote part of your class time to individual tutorials; this kind of attention, however, should be considered essential and in no way can it be considered a waste of class time.

A similar approach can be used in reading classes. When doing comprehension exercises (questions, multiple choice, or true/false) don't jump into the act too soon. If a student makes an error, tell him that he has not

given the correct answer, and to look again, to re-read. You can also ask him to quote or to refer to the text to support his answer.

How do we deal with errors in oral performance? This is a little more complicated. First of all, a distinction must be made between children and adults. With children we should probably do what mothers do with native children--they concentrate on meaning rather than on form. Also, they "teach" the right form by repeating what the child has said, except that they, of course, use the correct form. So, when the child says "All gone milk," the mother will probably say something like, "Ah, you finished your milk. That's a good girl!" The emphasis is always on the meaning of the utterance and only indirectly on form. With non-native children this is probably the best technique as well. They need a lot of exposure to the language and meaningful social re-inforcement rather than a formal explanation that they probably cannot comprehend.

With adults this is not so simple because they often want to understand the nature of their errors in order to avoid them in future performance. This kind of monitoring--conscious concentration on form--is a dangerous habit, however. If carried too far, it can interfere with fluent communication. As teachers, we must help our students to strike a balance between the ability to convey a message fluently and easily, and the capacity to exercise some control over the form of the utterance for accuracy and correctness.

There are five possible ways of dealing with corrections in an oral situation. The first possibility is to do nothing about it. Let students say anything they want in any way they want provided you understand them. If we use this technique, a Tarzan-like utterance would be acceptable. "Me want to eat" is meaningful and should go unchecked. The second possibility is to correct the student every time he makes a mistake. If we do this, we would probably be interrupting the student constantly, thus destroying any semblance of normal communication. The third possibility is to correct some errors, and to let others pass. This "discretionary" technique is dangerous because the student himself and others in the class may not know which utterances were correct and which weren't, and may assume that something was correct when, in fact, it was not. Students may be learning wrong forms or making generalizations from them. The fourth possibility is to take notes while the student is talking and to discuss the errors later. This technique avoids interruptions and gives you and the student a chance to deal with errors in a manner similar to the one suggested for written work. A possible danger, again, is that other students in the class may assume that there were no errors. This can be solved by taking up the errors in front of the whole class rather than individually. The last alternative is to use <u>all</u> of the techniques described above but to make the choice on the basis of the particular situation. This last alternative is probably the best.

Now, let's see how this can be done. It seems to me that it is essential that your students know which technique you are using in any particular situation. This will prevent them from making the wrong assumptions about what is correct or incorrect in what they hear.

The actual choice of technique will depend on the pedagogical focus of the lesson. For example, in a lesson where the focus is on grammar, concentrate on whatever formal points have been covered. If, on the other hand, the lesson is of a more communicative nature (a conversation, a debate, or a role-play, etc.), meaning and function should take precedence over form.

Students should only be interrupted if what they are saying is meaningless or unclear. When using this technique, students should be encouraged to paraphrase, to try another way. Paraphrasing, as opposed to repeating, is a technique that is, in my opinion, vastly underused in language teaching. When asking for clarification, try using situation formulas that you would use with native speakers: "I beg your pardon," "I didn't hear you," "What was that (again)?" "What do you mean?" "I don't understand," etc.

In addition, you may want to take notes. This might be a bit intimidating at the beginning, but students soon get used to it. Later, depending on the error--whether it is general or individual--you may want to bring it up with the class as a whole or with the individual student. I have seen classes in which a tape-recorder is used so that the teacher can later listen to a recording to analyze more closely the performance of the class or of an individual student. This can also be very effective once students have become accustomed to it.

When the error is of a cultural or socio-linguistic nature, we must be very careful and sensitive. To point out a faux pas of this kind can be very embarrassing unless it is done with extreme tact. If, during a conversation about inflation, a student asks you how much you make (which is not a taboo question is some cultures), your attitude should be one of interest rather than rejection of his behavior. A contrastive approach can be very healthy: ask other students in class whether that is a "normal" question in their culture, and then proceed to establish the differences.

To summarize--errors are natural in language. Teachers and students should understand that. Most of the errors that second-language learners make are variable; they change over time as their linguistic systems develop. Teachers should try to keep track of this development to see whether their students are progressing, are stuck, or are backsliding. This is true of errors in reading, in writing, and in oral production. I have pointed out several techniques that will make this process a little easier and clearer for both teachers and students. Whatever method of correction you use, make sure that your students understand it. Students should understand what you are doing and why. Consistency on your part will prevent students from guessing and making the wrong assumptions about correctness and incorrectness.

Finally, I'd like to offer a variation on the premise on which I told you this talk was based--to err is human, to forgive and understand is common sense...and that's good pedagogy.